What in the world IS the book of PSALMS?¹

Introduction

What is the book of Psalms? When you think of the Psalms, what's the first thing that comes into your mind? An inspirational book for your private devotions or a book with confusing prayers calling down God's curses on the wicked? Or both? When you think of the Psalms, do you think of prayers and praises that we offer to God or do you think of God's instruction and word that comes to us? Or both? When you think of the book of Psalms, is there one main theme or idea that comes into your mind? What is the book of Psalms? What's its purpose? What's it about?

It's certainly unlike any other book in the Bible. It has numerous authors, many of them anonymous. These numerous authors wrote very different kinds of Psalms – so different that at first you might not think they would all fit together in the same book. This exceedingly diverse collection of Psalms was actually written over a period of many centuries, with David writing in the 11th century B.C., and some of the other anonymous authors writing as many as 600 years later in the fifth century. The book of Psalms is unique in that it comes from many different periods of Israel's history – from the United Kingdom under David, to the divided kingdom of north and south, to the exile in Assyria and Babylon, and finally Israel's restoration and return to their homeland. You could say that the book of Psalms is something like the entire Old Testament, but in one book. Thirty-two of the thirty-eight remaining books of the Old Testament were all written *during this time* that the Psalms were being composed, and collected, and edited together into a single book.

So all of this raises a very important question. How did 150 very different and diverse compositions written by numerous different authors over a period of at least six centuries end up all gathered together in this one book that we call today, the Psalms?

I. A psalm is written

Well, first, someone had to write a psalm! We associate the book of Psalms especially with King David, and there's a reason for that.

✓ <u>2 Samuel 23:1</u> — Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, *the sweet psalmist of Israel.*³

Not quite half of the psalms are associated in some way with David. But then when David was king, he also created official temple guilds of singers and musicians (cf. Vangemeren).

¹ In the approach to the Psalms outlined in this sermon, I am hugely indebted to Walford's comments in the NICOT volume on the Psalms (cf. also Allen Ross' Commentary on the Psalms).

² e.g. chapter 1 = wisdom (cf. Proverbs); chapter 2 = enthronement (cf. Isaiah); chapter 3 = lament (cf. Job/Jeremiah/Lamentations)

³ Not only did David compose song lyrics, but he was famous as a musician himself (cf. Amos 6:5; 1 Samuel 16:15-23).

✓ 1 Chronicles 15:16–17 (cf. 6:31-47) — David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their brothers as the singers who should play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy. So the Levites appointed *Heman* [from the clan of Kohath]; and of his brothers *Asaph* [from the clan of Gershon]; and [from the clan of] Merari, their brothers, *Ethan[Jeduthun]*...; and with them their brothers...

So Heman, Asaph, and Ethan became the founders of three musical choirs in the temple that continued on even after they had died. And associated in some way with these three choirs we have another twenty-seven of the psalms.

II. Psalms are collected

As more and more psalms were written, they were gradually gathered together into different, small collections. Three hundred years after David, when Hezekiah was king, there were apparently at least two official collections of psalms.

✓ <u>2 Chronicles 29:30</u> — And Hezekiah the king and the officials commanded the Levites to sing praises to the LORD with *the words of David and of Asaph the seer*. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshiped.

[NOTE: For the following material, it might be helpful to refer to the charts included at the end of this document.]

In the book of Psalms today, the eleven psalms connected with Asaph are still almost all grouped together (73-83) with one exception at chapter 50. So why the one, lone exception? Who "messed" with the Asaph collection?

The psalms of David are also grouped together, but now in three different collections (3-41; 51-65; 138-145). Outside of these three different collections, there are ten other psalms of David scattered around in various spots (68-70, 86, 101, 103, 108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133). At the end of Psalm 72, we read:

✓ Psalm 72:20 — The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.

Originally, this probably referred to a single, early collection of David's psalms. But now since there are many psalms of David that actually come after 72, and since not all the psalms that come before 72 are of David, what could this note mean? Who "messed" with the David collection?

Remember Heman, the one who led the Kohathite choir? He was one of the sons of Korah (cf. 1 Chron. 6:22; 2 Chron. 20:19), and so it seems that there also came to be a small *collection* of psalms associated with "the sons of Korah." Today, eight of these psalms are still all together in a group (42-49) with four others coming much later at 84-85 and 87-88. So why aren't all the Korah psalms still in one collection? Who "messed" with the Korah psalms?

III. Collections of psalms are collected

As time went on, some of the smaller collections of psalms that were already being used in the temple were probably combined together along with other miscellaneous psalms to form bigger collections. This could *help* explain why we have duplicate psalms (14=53; 40:13-17 = 70; 108 = 57:7-11 & 60:5-12). If one Psalm was already in two different collections, then when those two collections were put together, you'd have the same psalm twice. But then could there be a *reason* why these duplications were allowed to remain when *perhaps* other duplications were eliminated?

One of these bigger collections of psalms might be what we could call the *Elohim* Psalms (cf. especially Ross, p. 51). Elohim is the Hebrew word for "God." But Yahweh is God's special covenant name by which He revealed Himself to Israel. In chapters 42-83, Elohim is used 201 times, and Yahweh only 44 times. There are actually places where we know that the editor took what was "Yahweh," and *changed* it to "Elohim." In the rest of the Psalms, Yahweh is used 648 times, and Elohim only 31 times. So chapters 42-83 are apparently a collection of other smaller collections (David; Asaph; sons of Korah) and some miscellaneous psalms all put together perhaps at a time when people were much more hesitant to use the name "Yahweh." (cf. Craigie)

So then, after all this, how did we finally end up with the book of Psalms that we have today?

IV. <u>Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Psalter is given it's final SHAPE by God's people to communicated God's MESSAGE.</u>

Maybe as many as 650-700 years after the first Psalms were written⁶ an editor or group of editors began the task of giving to the Psalms their final shape and number under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁷ (cf. Ross, 53) A lot had happened in 650 years. First, there had been the glorious days of the united kingdom under David and Solomon. Then the kingdom divided into North and South. Then the exile of the northern kingdom to Assyria and the southern kingdom to Babylon. And then finally Israel's return to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. A lot had happened, and a lot had changed. And so the 150 psalms that we have today were arranged and put together as a way of reflecting theologically and devotionally on all that had happened in Israel's history. When the Psalms were given their final shape, there was no king reigning in Jerusalem. Israel was an insignificant "nobody" in danger of being completely lost within the vast empires of first Persia, and then Greece, and eventually Rome. (cf. Walford, 38) So what was to keep Israel as a nation from just disappearing from history? – Which is exactly what happened to most other nations under the same circumstances. (cf. Walford, 28) How were the returned Jews to make *sense* of their history, and now their current place and meaning in the world? The Psalms were shaped and put together in such a way as to *answer this* question. And

⁴ Compare: Psalm 68:1 with Num. 10:35; Psalm 68:8 with Judges 5:5; Psalm 53:2, 4, 7 with Psalm 14:2, 4, 6; Psalm 40:13, 16 with Psalm 70:1, 4; but also compare 40:17 with 70:5! cf. Craigie

⁵ Eventually, it was not allowed to pronounce the divine name at all, or even to spell it out completely. Even today we don't know for sure if "Yahweh" is the right pronunciation.

⁶ The book of Psalms was known to the authors of the LXX in approximately the form that we have it in the 3^{rd} or 2^{nd} century B.C. (cf. Goldingay) Craigie proposes the final form by the 4^{th} century BC.

⁷ This, too, would have been a gradual process over a number of years.

they give this *answer* using the language of *praise and worship*, and *lament and complaint*, and *petition and trust*, and *teaching and instruction*, and *remembrance and celebration*.

In their final edition the Psalms were divided into five books (see the headings to Psalms 1, 42, 73, 90, 107). And it was the final editors (not the original authors of the Psalms) who marked the conclusion of each of these five books with a doxology of praise.⁸

At the end of Book I:

✓ Psalm 41:13 — Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!

Amen and Amen.

At the end of Book II:

✓ Psalm 72:18–19 — Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen!

At the end of Book III:

✓ Psalm 89:52 — Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.

At the end of Book IV:

✓ Psalm 106:48 — Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, "Amen!" Praise the LORD!

How do these five books help the returned Jews to make sense of their history, and now their current place and meaning amidst the world empires that threatened to swallow them up?

The first two chapters of Psalms are the *introduction* not just to the first book, but to all five.

Psalm 1 is a "wisdom psalm" ("Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked..."). It talks about the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, and focuses on God's Word and Law. *Psalm 2* is a "royal psalm." It speaks of God's anointed King ruling from Jerusalem with sovereign authority over all. And so "by means of [this] beginning... [the final] editors [of the Psalms]... introduce [the *two* most important] themes that will [permeate] the rest of the book." (Jacobson; 56) For the exiles returned to the land and in danger of being lost in the world empires of the day, it was obedience to God's *Word*, and hope in God's *Messiah* that would mark them out as a distinct and separate people in the world. And so the message of

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⁸ These doxologies are the only places in the Psalms where we find the word, "Amen." If the original Psalm compositions contained the doxology, then the final editors obviously placed these Psalms at the end of each book because of the doxology. However, the strong similarity between the doxologies "strongly suggests" (Walford) that they were all composed about the same time, and perhaps for the specific purpose of closing each book.

⁹ Notice how those first two Psalms are the only Psalms not connected with anyone in books I and II.

¹⁰ These two psalms show us the two main ways that God works to accomplish His purposes in the world: through God's *Word* and through God's anointed *King*. (cf. Jacobson, 57)

Psalms is the sovereign kingship of God over all the world (ch. 2), and our call to respond in faithful, and hope-filled obedience to His Word (ch. 1). 11

David was in a very real way the first king of Israel. It was to David that God gave His promise of an everlasting kingdom and rule. And so after the introduction, the book of Psalms begins with – David. The rest of **book I** is a collection of psalms all associated with King David. Reading these psalms is like looking through a window into every single part of David's life – as a king, a human being, a warrior, a parent, and the servant of the Lord. (Walford, 29) Most of these psalms are laments where God is called upon to save from the enemy and the oppressor. We know David's life was filled with conflict and oppression – from his own people, from foreign nations, from the Philistines, from Saul, and even from his own family. (Walford, 31) But the ultimate message of these laments and prayers is that God will hear and answer and deliver His king, and so also His people. "The Lord's special covenant with His king in Psalm 2 is demonstrated by David's protection in the Lord's presence" in the rest of book I. (Ross, 55)

Book II begins with a collection of psalms associated with the sons of Korah, and then ends with another collection of psalms almost all associated with David. Book II continues with the story of David as God's anointed King. But the last two chapters are a reminder that God's covenant with David was meant to be passed on to the next generation. In chapter 71 we have an old man praying for strength and protection at the end of his life. (We're probably meant to think of this old man as David.) And then in chapter 72 we have a prayer for Solomon, the next king of Israel - a prayer that God would give the new king strength to reign with justice and righteousness and bring blessing to the people. Books I and II end with these words: "The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended." (72:20) The point isn't that they're really ended, because they're not. And the point isn't that all the prayers so far have been prayers of David, because they haven't been. That may have been the point at one time, but in this final edition of the book of Psalms, the point seems to be that the story of David is finished, and now we move on to make sense of the next period in Israel's history.

In **book III** there's only one psalm associated with David. In book III, we struggle with life after David and Solomon – during the days of the divided kingdom. There are many depressing pictures of God's judgment because of sin. And yet the temple still stands, offering a promise of hope and security for God's people. (cf. Ross, 57) "I," "me," and "my," now gives way to "we," "us," and "our." "The voice of the individual David [in books I and II], gives way [in book III] to the voice of the [whole] community of faith, which is attempting to make sense of all that is going on around them." (Walford, 32) Book III begins with a psalm that questions whether there is order and even meaning in life. Why are the wicked prospering and the righteous oppressed? And then the book ends first with a lament that's more dark and bleak than any other lament in the book of Psalms (88), and then a royal psalm that pictures God throwing the crown of David to the ground (89). (cf. Walford, 33) At the end of book III, there seems to be no other future for Israel but destruction and exile – and this in spite of God's mercy and faithfulness. And yet even so, the final editors of the Psalms concluded book III with a doxology of praise and worship to God.

¹¹ The book of Psalms is a book of instruction concerning how the Lord's people are to live in obedience to God's Word and ultimately a book of prophecy concerning God's coming King and Messiah (cf. Jacobson, 57)

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Book IV is meant to be read in light of Israel's exile in a foreign land. 12 It begins with the only psalm associated with Moses in the entire book of Psalms. Just as Moses pleaded with God for mercy when Israel bowed down to the golden calf, so now in exile Israel looks back beyond David to Moses and the days of the Exodus, needing God to once again be merciful and redeem His people. 13 Outside of book IV Moses is mentioned only once in the entire book of Psalms (77:20), but here in book IV he's referred to seven times. ¹⁴ In the exile, the people look back to the days of Moses and God's redemption from Egypt for a reminder that "God remains faithful no matter what happens to the nation or its king." (Ross, 58) And so for the first time in the entire book, we have a collection of psalms that are concerned not with God's rule through the king in Jerusalem, but with Yahweh's reign from heaven over all the nations of the earth! Psalms 93, 97, and 99 all begin with these words: "The Lord reigns," and Psalms 93 and 95-99 all have the theme of God's sovereign rule over all the world. Even with the people in exile and the Davidic throne in ruins, God's people could look back to the days of Moses and take comfort that God was still faithful and still reigning even over the great empires of the world for the sake of His people. "Through the exile... the people came to see the sovereignty of Yahweh in a new light... they saw a great kingdom now in which the LORD himself would come to reign."¹⁵ (Ross, 58) Book IV ends with these words, which we are meant to read as a prayer of the people in exile:

✓ <u>Psalm 106:47</u> — Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.

And so we come at last to **book** V, which we're meant to read in light of God's faithful mercies to Israel and their return to the land. The opening verses read:

✓ <u>Psalm 107:1–3</u> — Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

In book V "David makes a dramatic reappearance in the [Psalms]... [his] voice returns..."! (Walford, 36) What are we to make of the sudden reappearance of David? It points to the people's renewed assurance that one day God will set His King, the Son of David, upon mount Zion, and He will reign over all the world forever (cf. 110). Book V is a book full of confidence, and hope, and devotion, and praise. So it's in book V that we have a collection of psalms that were sung by the people as they would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the various festivals (Pilgrim Psalms; 120-134). It's in book V that we have a collection of psalms that were recited by the returned Jews during the feast of Passover (Egyptian Hallel; 113-118). It's in book V that we have Psalm 119, an expression of love and devotion to God's Word which was recited during the feast of Pentecost. And, of course, it's in book V that we come to the end of the entire book

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¹² Notice that in books I–III, almost all of the psalms are associated with some *one* or some *group* of people. But in books IV–V most of the psalms are anonymous.

¹³ "Instead of recalling the faith and the triumphs of the monarchy, this collection looks back in history to the time of Moses and the exodus." (Ross, 58)

¹⁴ 90:title; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32 (cf. Walford, 34)

¹⁵ "And his appearance to reign is described in [the language of his coming down on Mount Sinai]: lightning, thick clouds, darkness, earthquakes, volcanoes and the like." (Ross, 58)

of Psalms. And so book five ends not with a one-verse doxology like the other books do, but with a whole collection of "Hallelujah Psalms." The last five chapters of the Psalms all begin and end with these words: "Praise the LORD!" The last chapter repeats the words: "Praise Him" no less than ten times in five verses. And the last verse of the last chapter says this:

✓ Psalm 150:6 — Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!

Conclusion

And so we see that the book of Psalms *mirrors* the faith of God's people across all the centuries (cf. VanGemeren) – faith in the God who is *always* our sovereign and faithful King – faith in the one who *is* King, and who *comes* to be King over *all* the world. As one commentator says: "The Book of Psalms is God's prescription for [the] church, because through it he reveals how great, wonderful, magnificent, wise, and utterly awe-inspiring he is." (VanGemeren) The Psalms have been loved by Christians throughout the centuries. And yet they have not always been rightly understood. In the Psalms, God comes to us and He shows us *how* to live out the life of FAITH (Psalm 1) *deeply*, and *fully*, and even *passionately* in light of His sovereign KINGSHIP over all the world (Psalms 2). May we truly be ready and *hungry* for this life of faith, and for this faithful God who is King over all!

BOOK I		BOOK II	BOOK III	BOOK IV	BOOK V	
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BOOK I	BOOK II	BOOK III	BOOK IV	BOOK V
Psalm 41:13 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and	Psalm 72:18–19 — Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen!	Psalm 89:52 Blessed be	Psalm 106:48 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, "Amen!"	BOOK V
Amen.		the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.	Praise the LORD!	

BOOK I David		BOOK II David	BOOK III Divided Nation	BOOK IV Exile	BOOK V Restoration	
1. Word 2. King 3. DAVID 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31.	32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41.	42. KORAH 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. ASAPH 51. DAVID 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. √ 66 67 68. DAVID 69. √ 71. OLD MAN 72. SOLOMON	73. ASAPH 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. ▼ 84. Korah 85. Korah 86. David 87. Korah 88. Korah 89. Ethan	90. MOSES 91. 92. 93. God reigns 94. 95. God reigns 96. 97. 98. 99. 100. 101. 102. 103. 104. 105. 106.	107. 108. 109. 110. 111. 112. 113. Egyptian 114. Hallel 115. 116. 117. 118. 119. 120. Pilgrim 121. Psalms 122. 123. 124. 125. 126. 127. 128. 129. 130. 131. 132. 133. 134. 135. 136. 137.	138. 139. 140. 141. 142. 143. 144. 145. 146. GREAT 147. HALLel 148. 149. 150.